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DEATH:

A

POETICAL ESSAY.



By BEILBY PORTEUS, M.A.
Fellow of *Christ's College*.

CAMBRIDGE,

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БЕЛГИЙСКОЕ
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КОЛЛЕГИУМ

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A Clause of Mr. SEATON's Will,
Dated Oct. 8. 1738.

I Give my Kislingbury Estate to the University of Cambridge for ever: the Rents of which shall be disposed of yearly by the Vice-Chancellor for the time being, as he the Vice-Chancellor, the Master of Clare Hall, and the Greek Professor for the time being, or any two of them shall agree. Which three persons aforesaid shall give out a Subject, which Subject shall for the first Year be one or other of the Perfections or Attributes of the Supreme Being, and so the succeeding Years, till the Subject is exhausted; and afterwards the Subject shall be either Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell, Purity of heart, &c. or whatever else may be judged by the Vice-Chancellor, Master of Clare Hall, and Greek Professor to be most conducive to the honour of the Supreme Being and recommendation of Virtue. And they shall yearly dispose of the Rent of the above Estate to that Master of Arts, whose Poem on the Subject given shall be best approved by them. Which Poem I ordain to be always in English, and so to be printed; the expence of which shall be deducted out of the product of the Estate, and the residue given as a reward for the Composer of the Poem, or Ode, or Copy of Verses.

WE the underwritten, do assign Mr. SEATON's Reward to Mr. PORTEUS, M. A. for his Poem on DEATH, and direct the said Poem to be printed, according to the tenor of the Will.

Oct. 8. 1759.

L. Caryl Vice-Chancellor.
J. Wilcox Master of Clare Hall.
M. Lort Greek Professor.

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D E A T H:

A

POETICAL ESSAY.

FRRIEND to the wretch, whom every friend forsakes,
I woo thee, DEATH! In Fancy's fairy paths
Let the gay Songster rove, and gently trill
The strain of empty joy. — Life and its joys
I leave to those that prize them. — At this hour,
This solemn hour, when Silence rules the world,
And wearied Nature makes a gen'ral pause,
Wrapt in Night's sable robe, through cloysters drear
And charnels pale, tenanted by a throng
Of meagre phantoms shooting cross my path.
With silent glance, I seek the shadowy vale
Of DEATH. — Deep in a murky cave's recess

Lav'd

Lav'd by Oblivion's listless stream, and fenc'd
By shelving rocks and intermingled horrors
Of yew' and cypress' shade from all intrusion
Of busy noontide-beam, the MONARCH sits
In unsubstantial Majesty enthron'd.

At his right hand, nearest himself in place
And frightfulness of form, his Parent SIN
With fatal industry and cruel care
Busies herself in pointing all his stings,
And tipping every shaft with venom drawn
From her infernal store: around him rang'd
In terrible array and strange diversity
Of uncouth shapes, stand his dread Ministers:
Foremost Old Age, his natural ally
And firmest friend: next him diseases thick,
A motley train; Fever with cheek of fire;
Consumption wan; Palfy, half warm with life,
And half a clay-cold lump; joint-tort'ring Gout,
And ever-gnawing Rheum; Convulsion wild;
Swol'n Dropsy; panting Asthma; Apoplex
Full-gorg'd. — There too the Pestilence that walks
In darkness, and the Sickness that destroys

At

A POETICAL ESSAY.

7

At broad noon-day. — These and a thousand more,
Horrid to tell, attentive wait; and, when
By Heaven's command DEATH waves his ebon wand,
Sudden rush forth to execute his purpose
And scatter desolation o'er the Earth.

Ill-fated Man, for whom such various forms
Of Mis'ry wait, and mark their future prey!
Ah! why, ALL-RIGHTEOUS FATHER, didst thou make
This Creature Man? why wake th' unconscious dust
To life and wretchedness? O better far
Still had he slept in uncreated night,
If this the Lot of Being! — Was it for this
Thy Breath divine kindled within his breast
The vital flame? For this was thy fair image
Stamp'd on his soul in godlike lineaments?
For this dominion giv'n him absolute
O'er all thy creatures, only that he might reign
Supreme in woe? — From the blest source of Good
Could Pain and Death proceed? Could such foul Ills
Fall from fair Mercy's hands? — Far be the thought,
The impious thought! God never made a Creature
But what was good. — He made a living Man:

The

The Man of Death was made by Man himself.
Forth from his Maker's hands he sprung to life,
Fresh with immortal bloom ; No pain he knew,
No fear of Death, no check to his desires
Save one command.—That one command (which stood
'Twixt him and ruin, the test of his obedience,)
Urg'd on by wanton curiosity
He broke.—There in one moment was undone
The fairest of God's works.—The same rash hand
That pluck'd in evil hour the fatal fruit
Unbarr'd the gates of Hell, and let loose Sin
And Death and all the family of Pain
To prey upon Mankind.—Young Nature saw
The monstrous crew, and shook thro' all her frame.
Then fled her new-born lustre, then began
Heaven's cheerful face to low'r, then vapours choak'd
The troubled air, and form'd a veil of clouds
To hide the willing Sun.—The Earth convuls'd
With painful throes threw forth a bristly crop
Of thorns and briars ; and Insect, Bird, and Beast,
That wont before with admiration fond
To gaze at Man, and fearless croud around him,

Now

A POETICAL ESSAY.

9

Now fled before his face, shunning in haste
Th' infection of his misery.— He alone,
Who justly might, th' offended Lord of Man,
Turn'd not away his face, he full of pity
Forsook not in this uttermost distress
His best-lov'd work.— That comfort still remain'd,
(That best that greatest comfort in affliction)
The countenance of God, and thro' the gloom
Shot forth some kindly gleams, to chear and warm
Th' offender's sinking soul.— Hope sent from Heav'n
Uprais'd his drooping head, and shew'd afar
A happier scene of things; the PROMIS'D SEED
Trampling upon the SERPENT's humbled crest,
DEATH of his sting disarm'd, and the dank grave
Made pervious to the realms of endless day,
No more the limit but the gate of life.

Chear'd with the view, MAN went to till the ground
From whence he rose; sentenc'd indeed to toil
As to a punishment, yet (ev'n in wrath
So merciful is Heav'n) this toil became
The solace of his woes, the sweet employ
Of many a live-long hour, and surest guard

B

Against

Against disease and Death. — DEATH, tho' denounc'd
Was yet a distant Ill, by feeble arm
Of Age, his sole support, led slowly on.
Not then, as since, the short-liv'd sons of men
Flock'd to his realms in countless multitudes;
Scarce in the course of twice five hundred years
One solitary ghost went shiv'ring down
To his unpeopled shore; — In sober state,
Through the sequester'd vale of rural life,
The venerable PATRIARCH guileless held
The tenor of his way; Labour prepar'd
His simple fare, and Temp'rance rul'd his board.
Tir'd with his daily toil, at early eve
He sunk to sudden rest; gentle and pure
As breath of evening Zephyr and as sweet
Were all his slumbers; with the Sun he rose,
Alert and vigorous as He, to run
His destin'd course.— Thus nerv'd with Giant Strength
He stem'd the tide of time, and stood the shock
Of ages rolling harmleſs ov'r his head.
At life's meridian point arriv'd, he stood,
And looking round saw all the vallies fill'd

With

A POETICAL ESSAY.

II

With nations from his loins ; full-well content
To leave his race thus scatter'd o'er the Earth
Along the gentle slope of life's decline
He bent his gradual way, till full of years
He dropt like mellow fruit into his grave.

Such in the infancy of Time was Man,
So calm was life, so impotent was DEATH.
O had he but preserv'd these few remains
These shatter'd fragments of lost happiness
Snatch'd by the hand of heav'n from the sad wreck
Of innocence primæval ; still had he liv'd
Great ev'n in ruin, tho' fall'n, yet not forlorn,
Though mortal, yet not every where beset
With Death in every shape ! But He, impatient
To be compleatly wretched, hastes to fill up
The measure of his woes. — 'Twas Man himself
Brought Death into the world, And Man himself
Gave keenness to his darts, quicken'd his pace,
And multiplied destruction on mankind.

First Envy, Eldest-Born of Hell embru'd
Her hands in blood, and taught the Sons of Men
To make a Death which Nature never made,

B 2

And

And God abhorr'd, with violence rude to break
The thread of life ere half its length was run,
And rob a wretched brother of his being.

With joy Ambition saw, and soon improv'd
The execrable deed. — 'Twas not enough
By subtle fraud to snatch a single life,
Puny impiety ! whole kingdoms fell
To fate the lust of power ; more horrid still,
The foulest stain and scandal of our nature
Became its boast. — *One* Murder made a Villain,
Millions a Hero. — Princes were privileg'd
To kill, and numbers sanctified the crime.

Ah ! why will Kings forget that they are Men ?
And Men that they are brethren ? Why delight
In human sacrifice ? Why burst the ties
Of Nature, that should knit their souls together
In one soft bond of amity and love ?

Yet still they breathe destruction, still go on
Inhumanly ingenious to find out
New pains for life, new terrors for the grave,
Artificers of Death ! Still Monarchs dream
Of universal Empire growing up

From

From universal ruin. — Blast the design
GREAT GOD OF HOSTS, nor let thy creatures fall
Unpitied victims at Ambition's shrine !

Yet say, should Tyrants learn at last to feel,
And the loud din of battle cease to bray ;
Should dove-ey'd Peace o'er all the earth extend
Her olive branch, and give the world repose,
Would Death be foil'd ? Would health, and strength,
and youth

Defy his power ? Has he no arts in store,
No other shafts save those of war ? — Alas !
Ev'n in the smile of Peace, that smile which sheds
A heav'ly sunshine o'er the soul, there basks
That serpent Luxury : War its thousands slays,
Peace its ten thousands : In th' embattled plain
Tho' Death exults, and claps his raven wings,
Yet reigns he not ev'n there so absolute,
So merciless, as in yon frantic scenes
Of midnight revel and tumultuous mirth,
Where, in th' intoxicating draught conceal'd,
Or couch'd beneath the glance of lawless Love,
He snares the simple youth, who nought suspecting
Means to be blest — But finds himself undone.

Down

Down the smooth stream of life the Stripling darts
Gay as the morn; bright glows the vernal sky,
Hope swells his sails, and passion steers his course;
Safe glides his little bark along the shore
Where virtue takes her stand, but if too far
He launches forth beyond discretion's mark,
Sudden the tempest scowls, the surges roar,
Blot his fair day, and plunge him in the deep.
O sad but sure mischance! O happier far
To lie like gallant HOWE midst Indian wilds
A breathless corse, cut off by savage hands
In earliest prime, a generous sacrifice
To freedom's holy cause; than so to fall
Torn immature from life's meridian joys,
A prey to Vice, Intemperance, and Disease.
Yet die ev'n thus, thus rather perish still,
Ye Sons of Pleasure, by th' Almighty strick'n,
Than ever dare (though oft, alas! ye dare)
To lift against yourselves the murd'rous steel
To wrest from GOD's own hand the sword of Justice
And be your own avengers. — Hold rash Man,
Though with anticipating speed thou'st rang'd

Through

Through every region of delight, nor left
One joy to gild the evening of thy days,
Though life seem one uncomfortable void,
Guilt at thy heels, before thy face despair,
Yet gay this scene, and light this load of woe
Compar'd with thy hereafter. — Think, O think,
And e'er thou plunge into the vast abyss,
Pause on the verge awhile, look down and see
Thy future mansion. — Why that start of horror?
From thy slack hand why drops th' uplifted steel?
Didst thou not think such vengeance must await
The wretch, that with his crimes all fresh about him
Rushes irreverent, unprepar'd, uncall'd,
Into his Maker's presence, throwing back
With insolent disdain his choicest gift?

Live then, while Heav'n in pity lends thee life,
And think it all too short to wash away
By penitential tears and deep contrition
The scarlet of thy crimes. — So shalt thou find
Rest to thy soul, so unappall'd shalt meet
Death when he comes, not wantonly invite
His ling'ring stroke. — Be it thy sole concern

With

With innocence to live, with patience wait
Th' appointed hour ; too soon that hour will come
Tho' Nature run her course ; But Nature's God,
If need require, by thousand various ways,
Without thy aid, can shorten that short span,
And quench the lamp of life. — O when he comes
Rous'd by the cry of wickedness extreme
To Heav'n ascending from some guilty land
Now ripe for vengeance ; when he comes array'd
In all the terrors of Almighty wrath ;
Forth from his bosom plucks his ling'ring Arm,
And on the miscreants pours destruction down !
Who can abide his coming ? Who can bear
His whole displeasure ? In no common form
Death then appears, but starting into Size
Enormous, measures with gigantic stride
Th' astonish'd Earth, and from his looks throws round
Unutterable horror and dismay.
All Nature lends her aid. — Each Element
Arms in his cause. — Ope fly the doors of Heav'n,
The fountains of the deep their barriers break,
Above, below, the rival torrents pour,

And

And drown Creation, — or in floods of fire
Descends a livid cataract and consumes
An impious race. — Sometimes when all seems peace,
Wakes the grim whirlwind, and with rude embrace
Sweeps nations to their grave, or in the deep
Whelms the proud wooden world; full many a youth
Floats on his wat'ry bier, or lies unwept
On some sad desert shore! — At dead of night
In sullen silence stalks forth PESTILENCE:
CONTAGION close behind taints all her steps
With poys'nous dew; no smiting Hand is seen,
No sound is heard; but soon her secret path
Is mark'd with desolation; heaps on heaps
Promiscuous drop: — No friend, no refuge near;
All, all, is false and treacherous around,
All that they touch, or taste, or breathe, is DEATH.

But ah! what means that ruinous roar? why fail
These tott'ring feet? — Earth to its centre feels
The Godhead's power, and trembling at his touch
Through all its pillars, and in ev'ry pore,
Hurls to the ground with one convulsive heave
Precipitating domes, and towns, and tow'rs,

The work of ages. — Crush'd beneath the weight
Of gen'ral devestation, millions find
One common grave; not ev'n a widow left
To wail her sons: the house, that should protect,
Entombs its master, and the faithless plain,
If there he flies for help, with sudden yawn
Starts from beneath him. — Shield me, gracious Heav'n,
O snatch me from destruction! If this Globe,
This solid Globe, which thine own hand hath made
So firm and sure, if this my steps betray;
If my own mother Earth from whence I sprung
Rise up with rage unnatural to devour
Her wretched offspring, whither shall I fly?
Where look for succour? Where, but up to thee
Almighty Father? Save, O save thy suppliant
From Horrors such as these! — At thy good time
Let Death approach; I reck not — let him but come
In genuine form, not with thy vengeance arm'd,
Too much for Man to bear. — O rather lend
Thy kindly aid to mitigate his stroke,
And at that hour when all aghast I stand,
(A trembling Candidate for thy compassion,)

On

On this World's brink, and look into the next ;
When my Soul starting from the dark unknown
Casts back a wishful look, and fondly clings
To her frail prop, unwilling to be wrench'd
From this fair scene, from all her custom'd joys,
And all the lovely relatives of life,
Then shed thy comforts o'er me ; then put on
The gentlest of thy looks. — Let no dark Crimes
In all their hideous forms then starting up
Plant themselves round my couch in grim array,
And stab my bleeding heart with two-edg'd torture,
Sense of past guilt, and dread of future woe.
Far be the ghastly crew ! And in their stead,
Let chearful Memory from her purest cells
Lead forth a goodly train of Virtues fair
Cherish'd in earliest youth, now paying back
With tenfold usury the pious care,
And pouring o'er my wounds the heav'nly balm
Of conscious innocence. — But chiefly, THOU,
Whom soft-ey'd Pity once led down from Heav'n
To bleed for Man, to teach him how to live,
And, oh ! still harder Lesson ! how to die,

Dif-

Disdain not Thou to smooth the restless bed
Of Sickness and of Pain. — Forgive the tear
That feeble Nature drops, calm all her fears,
Wake all her hopes, and animate her faith,
Till my rapt Soul anticipating Heav'n
Bursts from the thraldom of incumbring clay,
And on the wing of Extasy upborn
Springs into Liberty, and Light, and Life.

THE END.

